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THE CULTURE OF GADGET EXAMINED FROM THE ASPECT OF POPULAR AND KONSUMERIST CULTURE

*«Best man's friend is no longer today another man
nor a dog but the object. Not just any kind of item
but a specific one – the **gadget**»*

Marek Krajewski

Keywords: gadget, gadget typology, toys, popular culture, consumerist culture, mass and popular culture.

Introduction

Social and civilization changes, growth in industry and means of global communication together with the freedom to travel around the globe make consumerism developing rapidly with an increased number of clients at the same time. Changes which modern culture and society undergoes are in favour of development a consumer industry together with the culture of gadget. The culture of gadget refers to a widespread custom within society to possess products not only for the fact of their practical usage, sentimental or decorative character but to satisfy the needs which result from a consumptive attitude. The desire itself to possess and permanent collection of the goods may be so strong that a man finds it difficult to realize his/her real needs.

We are surrounded and constantly increase the number of items, electronic devices, smaller or bigger in size, which are needed for a while, collecting them based on our impulse acts, they are fashionable or they have just become out-of-date confronted with the latest products released.

Gadgets appear to be an interesting cultural phenomenon which results both from direct consumers' needs and their ventures but also from social, civilization and technology advancement. Moreover, it is linked with inventing needs for their potential customer which may denote preparing the addressees-to-be towards their dreams and desires they do not even knowabout, which are supposed to be imperceptibly produced for companies usewhich as a result expect profits. In other words, first the products are made and then with the use of various market and manipulation mechanisms a client is searched for.

Understanding the meaning of a gadget

Reinforcing popular culture is closely linked with sudden technology growth, evolution in ways of producing goods, widespread culture and making use of it. Nowadays the term of a gadget is multi-meaning with much broader understanding. Specialist literature and everyday life bring numerous definitions of a gadget. Following the definition of a gadget given at 'Dictionary of Foreign Words' by Władysław Kopaliński the definition of a 'gadget' commonly means a

small device or a mechanism which is cutting edge technology, an improvement to an existing bigger in size device or an instrument which may enable technical convenience [6, 184]. Etymology of the word 'gadget' was described in the book *'Sequel. Further adventures with culture in global world'* by Wojciech Józef Burszta and Waldemar Kuligowski. Initially that was the term to name in Polish some of the objects regarded as 'extras', 'contraptions' or simply 'odds and sods'. These were tiny electrical kitchen devices like whisks, mixers or blenders [4, 22].

When referred to the meaning given by Marek Krajewski a gadget is one of the products of a popular culture. It is an item with the following distinctive features: 'a) it is small enough to be carried everywhere and easily used in public places such as restaurants and pubs, planes and trains, conference rooms, beaches and parks; b) it has multi-function use, however these are symbolic functions which are emphasized over their practical use (in other words, we could easily get by without them and the may become troublesome, still they catch other's attention and they are distinctive; c) the fact of using a gadget is a privilege for the owner still others should be allowed to watch and try; d) it is single which means that it is either a modern offering, it comes from other cultural background or another historical period' [7, 35]. Apart from that, gadgets are commonly recognized as they are novelties and their brands are worldwide known and become chosen while shopping and distinguish the owner's social background – they become the symbol associated with social and identity meanings not to mention an entertainment function they bring.

Nowadays everything may be regarded as a gadget depending on the owner. Thus, these may be tiny items like china figures, mug mats, paper clips, ball pens, key fobs or charms which are either advertising items or they do not have any practical usage. Similar meanings of gadgets were given by respondents while doing a survey by Kamila Rudnicka. They referred to gadgets as small advertising items, toys or small electronic devices. In such meaning gadgets may be items associated with a brand name, film, book, computer game etc. which change their initial connotation by the logo, advertising, characters or photos from films or computer games placed on. That way, their primary usage function becomes of minor importance while it is substituted by another function and the item gets different meaning [10, 185]. Another definition refers to 'gadgets' as items comprising numerous functions which are unique, equipped with many conveniences which enlarge the range of possibilities offered by the object or even they completely change its nature. A good example of it may be a radio with an alarm clock, which can be easily used as a night lamp, a clock or a torch, another one might be a GPS system with sophisticated extras built-in, wrist watches which can display blood pressure and body temperature, altitude or a calculator, a flexible keyboard which can be easily rolled-up when not needed.

A characteristic feature of these gadgets compared to other specialistic devices which combine various functions (e.g. palmtops) is that they are aimed towards amateurs and their further functions are supposed to provide more opportunities for the user, offer extra 'frills' which may raise one's social prestige position and measure up his 'customer's expectations'. The items are usually reasonably priced

although they may also appear quite costly [12, 200]. Additional attributes of these devices do not have to be either functional or particularly useful for the owner as their main goal is to attract and catch the customer by offering him 'more for less price', of extra symbolic product which in fact becomes most important factor to make a decision about the purchase. 'The gadget with its frills becomes in a way a magical object combining and recalling at a time various worlds – sound and picture, speech, its recording and an option to listen to it back afterwards not to mention the play and learning function' [12, 58].

Trying to deduct a single definition of the gadget becomes simply impossible as its use and everyday meaning expands with changes in consumers' consciousness. The term is multi-meaning so trying to determine a particular object depends on the context given and attached connotation [1, 141]. A gadget, above all, may be understood as any object which primary functions have been modified and it has received a new dimension, still its possession is desirable and distinctive. A practical usage is therefore put aside in customer's mind and the most crucial becomes the social fact of possessing and aesthetic sphere which adds more color to surrounding reality. Also the respondents who took part in Kamila Rudnicka's survey paid attention to additional function of gadgets which is information on a social background and status of the owner [10, 185]. It results from a combination of desired kinds of gadgets and a current trend and consequently it enforces which of these items place their owners around 'trendy' or regarded to be on a higher level of a social ladder of society. According to Piotr Żabicki one of the main features of a gadget is its multi-action use and fulfilling the desire of possessing more and more fashionable and sophisticated items which in return gives the owner psychical and social reinforcement [12, 59]. The latter may lead to close connotations with the word 'celebrity' and when referred to Marek Krajewski who states that a celebrity is a person who is not characterized by any outstanding features in terms of personality traits, desired social values, patterns to follow but as Daniel Boorstin or Chris Rojek say – becomes well known with no peculiar reasons [7, 24]. A celebrity, appears as a new eminence of our times and more frequently referred to Daniel J. Boorstin who states that 'a celebrity is a person whose popularity comes from the fact that he/she is simply popular' [3, 77–78, 84]. David Weinberger [11, 9] wrote about an interesting phenomenon which is based on interrelationship between the picture of a man with his desires and the surrounding reality, which processes he encounters, what kind of people he is surrounded by, what is he offered by the culture he has grown up with. All that means that the way of functioning in contemporary world influences our personality and generally has an impact on what kind of society we become – new worlds create new people.

The culture of gadget has developed as an aspect of consumerist culture and becomes an inseparable element of its existence. In consumerist society people's needs and desires become separated from individuals and as an external force they have an effect on social processes including identity ones. Consumerism becomes as an attribute of a society instead of an individual's single feature [2, 36]. The main assumption of consumerism is the statement

that everyone has the right and duty to different kind of consumption – goods, values, culture, film, music, books and time [2, 64]. A characteristic feature of consumerism is not only the need to purchase and possess things but above all the feeling of the need to remove and replace things which become worn out or they are out of fashion with new ones [2, 43]. Gadget fans is a special group searched for by the market and the whole machine of supply and demand which prevents from economic stagnation but raises controversy among educators, sociologists and psychologists.

Gadgets may become a form of escape from everyday life, an interesting way of getting by in contemporary world, in the circuit of close friends and acquaintances, a way to relieve daily stress or just enjoying the fact of possessing certain, usually small items, emblems or amulets. They are commonly associated with kitsch but it is not a rule as they may become sophisticated items characteristic for an individual's personality. Wisława Szymborska – one of the most eminent Polish poet whose poems have been translated into more than 40 languages and she was awarded with the Nobel Prize, was a keen collector of old postcards, small magnets, the author of collages and an organizer of renowned raffles. She was a person with a great sense of humor. She would gather everyday use items such as original pictures with collages, mug mats, little magnets shaped as stamps, diaries and notebooks, book marks, plates with humorous quotations and other knick-knacks. It reveals that gadgets are differently treated by their owners and they serve various functions.

Tab. 1. *Positive and negative features of gadgets*

Positive features of gadgets	Negative features of gadgets
Interesting objects which bring enjoyment	Object which usually provide short-term feeling of satisfaction as there are new ones available soon
Large selection of gadgets depending on customer's need	Excess of gadgets may be overwhelming and irritating e.g. in situations when realized that one cannot buy all he would fancy
Possessing gadgets is nothing bad	Possessing them may become an obsession and one may become a gadget freak
Sale drives the market for the goods and adds to economic growth	Excessive growth of consumptive culture and easy access to these products encourages for a purchase
Gadgets have utility features	They do not have to possess utility features they may bring temporary enjoyment, be amusing and funny, useless in short time
Their purchase can be thought carefully over	They are often bought on impulse of a current trend and advertising and not consciously thought
The product can be given back	Due to their offer price they are hardly refunded or complained about

Gadgets are generally at reasonable prices and there may be found fakes of brand products	Gadgets may be found very pricy and their possession is associated with social prestige. Their strong desire to be purchased may result in renouncing other goods of primary use
They make life easier and more attractive for the user	Gadget owners become enslaved. When referred to personality a gadget makes that its owner becomes of what he uses
Gadgets are often used to advertise products	Mass distributed advertising gadgets, including those ones which are unconsciously sent to their addressees e.g. by e-mails or spam offers

Source: Agnieszka Roguska – to develop their own.

Categories of gadgets

A classification of gadgets is exceptionally difficult. It results from the fact that there is a vast number of products available on the market which are hard to associate with a particular group. The easiest way is to divide them into men's, ladies, children's or sports and kitchen use, daily and magical, casual and festive, erotic, addressed to young mothers, cosmetics, fashion follow-ups, automotive, religious e.g. devotional objects which are small items of religious worship etc. Still such division is too simplified and detailed. According to Kamila Rudnicka, she separates gadgets based on advertising division into commercial and social ones [10, 180]. Here is another suggestion towards further grouping of gadgets based on:

1. Technology related gadgets

These types of electronic devices and objects are linked with technological inventions and conveniences. They are basically small in size devices which allow communicating, store and play music or films and enable to use games etc. Their common feature is the 'mobility' [6, 337], which is meant here as an easy way to use them irrelevant to their power supply, possibility to connect via wireless Internet. They may be equipped with additional functions such as organizer, calendar, alarm clock, stopwatch, camera, torch, a cap with air-conditioning function built-in. A characteristic feature of these technology gadgets is their frequent replacement for much modern ones. Among the items found in this kind of category is the mobile phone, portable MP3 music or films (MP4) players, smartphones or tablets.

2. Advertising gadgets

Advertising gadgets tend to be small items which are aimed at focusing on a particular brand name or another product by placing a logo or other relevant connotation to the product. This category of gadgets may include a wide range of items promoted together with the main product. A good example are film promoting campaigns where apart from the purchase of an individual film (by the cinemas or on DVD sale), it can be accompanied with lots of extras available like T-shirts, mugs, backpacks, mascots etc. with printed photos of the main characters or film sets. Typical advertising gadgets are small objects offered by companies and manufacturers for their current or potential customers. Most frequently these are ball pens, calendars, promoting lanyards, key fobs but also

mouse pads, cigarette lighters etc. Such souvenirs are supposed to build-up a positive image of the company and while making use of them, they reinforce the logo and advertising slogan in customers' consciousness. There can be observed an increased number of advertising virtual gadgets on the market. These are games, electronic greetings cards, photos or films which include a logo or an advertising slogan for a company.

3. Funny and amusing gadgets

This category of gadgets includes various objects and they combine a common characteristic feature which is the element of joke and fun. Some of them are ordinary items either with extra unusual functions built-in or an odd and astonishing shape. They can be often referred to an absurd or simply a kitsch. Among the number of these found on the market there may be for example a chef's knife which looks like blood stained, a toilet roll with imprint of 100 PLN note, a miniature battery powered desk hover, funny little magnets, varied fluorescent items, single use string briefs. In some cases they follow modern technologies e.g. a spy robot controlled by Wi-Fi, a ball pen or sunglasses with a camera, a lamp operated by a hand movement [5]. The main purpose of these things is to provide entertainment for the owners and lead to the state of relaxation while their functionality is received as an extra and plays a side role. These gadgets are frequently used as gifts or presents which is anticipated to bring surprise and trigger funny atmosphere.

Picture 1. *A desktop hover Henry*



Source: www.ministerstwogadzetow.com /accessed on 03. 01. 2015/

4. Social and personal gadgets

Among the category of social gadgets there are items which functionality becomes a minor purpose referred to their general promoting idea. These kinds of gadgets may include T-shirts, key fobs, eco-packets or silicon wrist bands. By the imprinted symbols or slogans they resemble of either global or local problems and that way they serve an informing role. Personal gadgets are supposed to carry an

informative message sent by their owners as to a disease, e.g. diabetics or a home address when referred to Alzheimer patients or those with memory loss caused by other factors. Moreover, there comes a group of items directly addressed to a person because of his/her private photos which are printed on mugs or T-shirts. There may appear numerous of unusual goods and little objects made on request for example lighters or ashtrays found in various shapes, T-shirts with imprints, key fobs, mascots etc. There has developed a separate branch on the company market which aims at fulfilling their clients desires, including those sophisticated. All becomes possible now with the use of scanning and 3D printers.

Picture 2. *A manicure stand band*



Picture 3. *A silicon wrist with a slogan «Livestrong» by Nike*



Source for picture 2: <http://drukw3d.com/gadzetyhobby/> [accessed on: 03. 01. 2015 r.]

Source for picture 3: <http://www.claudineivari.com/livestrong&page=5> [accessed on: 03. 01. 2015 r.]

5. Virtual gadgets

A group of virtual gadgets is a symptom of a modern age and they exist in virtual or digital world. This category comprises cell phone rings, wallpapers, application and games, mostly in use for smart phones and tablets. Moreover, there are the so called gadgets – symbols e.g. the chat site Gagu-gadu offers possibility to purchase or present yourself to other person with a little picture or a graphic description which will be attributed to someone's account. It turns out that one may treat himself or present someone with a thing which does not exist in reality, it cannot be touched, does not smell but it is intriguing for the fact that it can be possessed and serve a function.

The presented classification of gadgets is neither complete nor closed but serves as a suggestion to verify the vast area of gadgets. There are some of them which are easy to classify within a group of objects, but there are also ones which may be found in different categories. Customers' needs are constantly growing and they are fueled by the market which means that there will be new gadgets and they will require new categories to be fit in.

Gadgets and the youths

Gadgets are mainly possessed by the youths, they become an advantage and indicate their position, reflect preferences, interests or membership to a

particular social group or subculture which is linked with a leadership role. We learn about collecting and living around gadgets since early childhood or we possess such predisposition which have been shaped by various factors e.g. a passion towards collecting certain things, objects or surrounding with little items which brings enjoyment or even a feeling of security. Children and youths' tastes are influenced by advertising, peer opinions, contents broadcasted by mass media, current trends for example gadgets which are emphasized by latest film releases for children and teenagers— technique which is used by manufactures of garments, sweets, mugs, school equipment, cell phones companies or takeaway restaurants like Mc Donald's where children's meals are sold with popular little toys. Gadgets may be also perceived as toys, objects which bring enjoyment while playing and express our will to share them with peers by the fact of possessing them.

The media and internet shops support customers' ventures and purchase of even most sophisticated gadgets or those which satisfy their owners' needs. Global unification process, especially found among teenagers concerns both outfit, personal belongings, but also the way of spending free time, listening to music or participation at social networking sites like Facebook which allows to follow general trends referred to gadgets. An important aspect of globalization, having influence on widespread culture of gadgets is an easy access to these products. There are shops being opened selling funny stuff where each item is priced 5 PLN, or shops with products made in China which are supposed to be of lower quality but still found at reasonable price. An important factor which influences widespread of culture of gadgets in society is the growth of a living standard among various social classes. Economic growth has enabled that exclusive products to become accessible to possess for an average person and has provided sufficient sources for their purchase. On the other hand, there has grown up a number of single-use products cheap and commonly used which has led to 'the culture of throwing away' or the culture of 'single use' [12, 56]. Nowadays having sufficient amount of money allows to buy or order nearly everything. There are Internet sites offering items on sale or to buy products across Poland or Europe. One of the very few examples may be the internet auction sites such as Allegro, eBay, Za 10 groszy.pl whereas most common internet shops offering gadgets can be found at: www.ministerstwogadzetow.com, www.gadgets.pl, www.bigboystoys.pl, www.toys4boys.pl or the TV program «Mango». Widespread of the culture of gadgets by the Internet is also linked with a popularity of numerous networking sites and common use of the Internet communicators.

It gives impetus to a consumer spiral, feeling the need of possessing and get satisfaction after for example a successful bet on a desired product or a feeling of having benefited during a sale. Such kind of consumerist attitude is in favour of purchasing more and more gadgets. However, the consumer feeling of fulfillment is usually short-term, because following Józef Burszta [4, 23], gadget objects are becoming old fast as they are guided by fashion and current trends. This kind of consumption market is growing rapidly so the rotation of items is very fast.

Nowadays their durability is decreasing, calculated for the period of warranty. A common belief that the more – the better concerns a number of spheres of modern life: more shopping means more emotions, the bigger the packaging – the more sauce, juice, information or functions it possesses [4, 92]. The objects are becoming desired not for the fact of their real utility or everyday functionality but for their illusory value shaped by trendy media and the fashion but also real or imaginative uprise in social position of an individual in a group or upgrading self-esteem seen by the others. Young people may pay closer attention to gadgets rather than having a personal contact in real world or caring about true relations and values. '(...) a global teenager has a wide knowledge about modern music, fashion and other cultural trends but he also has a knowledge of top cultural gadgets... [9, 144].

The mechanism of fashion does not only relate to the sphere of an outlook (the garment or hairstyle) but also to personal objects possessed and the will to be associated with a group. Therefore, we have a cell phone, a smartphone, a tablet, an MP3 player or a pen-drive. All these objects generate extras such as promoting lanyards, covers, stickers, various decorations but also applications which can also be regarded as gadgets. Gadgets use digital technologies and these also enter consumers' market as such.

Picture 4. *Earphones in cover* **Picture 5.** *Mug heater powered by USB cable*



Source for picture 4: <http://www.jarograf.eu/szczegoly,1884.html> [accessed on: 28.01. 2015].

Source for picture 5: <http://www.jarograf.eu/szczegoly,1859.html> [accessed on: 28.01. 2015].

Gadgets need to be interesting, ingenious and shocking because it is the feature of its effectiveness and attraction for potential buyers. These kind of objects especially meant for children are usually colorful, they are supposed to raise positive feelings, be multi-function but they are usually made of poor materials and become out-of-date after a time. 'The main principle of consumption ideology is a cult of novelty'. New information is more important rather than the older one, a new product is better from the one used a day before. In consumption society fulfilling needs of all kind including spiritual or interpersonal can be easily led to

a material dimension' [8, 41]. A gadget may become a substitute for something very expensive, an original product one cannot afford, a source for a good fun and fulfill the desire to possess something with a particular aim or just without it, unless it is just a pure desire to purchase something.

Picture 6. *A notes clip and a sharpener*



Picture 7. *A container for ball-pens and toys*



Source for picture 6: <http://www.jarograf.eu/szczegoly,2510.html> [accessed on: 28.01. 2015].

Source for picture 7: <http://www.jarograf.eu/szczegoly,2511.html> [accessed on: 28.01. 2015].

Conclusions

Modern world is a vast battlefield to find a consumer with his values and hierarchy needs. On one hand a consumer becomes a bargaining card for numerous companies, because it touches the sphere of influence, prestige and development of varied economic subjects. Gadgets are a crucial elements in a market game, mass and pop culture. On the other hand, a consumer decides for himself when looking for gadgets which naturally reflect his personality and attitude. They become elements of communication between the owners and companies and they are distinguishing marks of many people and subjects acting on the market. Gadgets are certainly items to let people stand from the crowd not because of their form but also for the fact of practical use.

Their choice apart from financial restrictions is subject to other criteria such as aesthetic values, an agreement with current trends or a subjective desire to possess, utility, originality and universality. Gadgets are an excellent pretext for shopping. Another important factor especially when it comes to the so called technology gadgets is a dynamic growth in their opportunities and functions which induces a customer to buy more and more modern devices even though the previous ones would fully satisfy their needs and are still in use. We face the situation of converted order – the need becomes a side issue compared to a purchase [13, 9]. Among the gadgets there is a separate group which is unique

for its low price which in return allows for frequent purchase and consequently giving more satisfaction for the consumer. Values, slogans and ideas which are manifested by social gadgets are strongly internalized by the user who for instance by the fact of wearing a band with a particular slogan gets a feeling of stronger identity with the problem he tries to present.

Educating through gadgets allows for breaking stereotypes, making much conscious choice, a change in social interactions, critical approach to information received, but it also teaches an involvement in various social charity actions [10, 182, 188], acquire abilities for making choice but also closer perception of undergoing cultural changes.

The article is supposed to introduce the issues of the culture of gadget as a consequence of mass and popular culture growth, civilization, technological and consumerism progress. There has been an attempt made to determine what gadgets are, how they influence people, how their owners are perceived by themselves and society opinion. It touches mainly building social status and self-esteem, creating identity or self perception and opposed to public opinion. On one hand, gadgets may be associated with toys and objects to bring enjoyment while playing and fancy sharing with peers even for the fact of possessing them. However, they may become more than toys – a product of modern times, something which influences social status, allows for acceptance among peer group and simply fulfill the need of possessing the object. The article also gives examples of suggested gadget typology.

В статье акцентируется внимание на стремительное распространение в системе потребительского общества гаджетов как результата технологизации массовой культуры. Была сделана попытка определения того, какими бывают гаджеты, как они влияют на людей, как их воспринимают сами владельцы и каково о них мнение общества. С одной стороны, гаджеты могут быть интерпретированы как игрушки и предметы, приносящие удовольствие во время игры, а также как реализация какой-то фантазии, и даже гордости от самого факта обладания. В перспективе гаджеты имеют все шансы повлиять на повышение социального статуса своего обладателя, особенно в молодёжной среде. Автор материала также приводит примеры типологии гаджетов.

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